

# HUMOUR ME



**AGNES** ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE

# The most perfect caricature is that which, on a small surface, with the simplest means, most accurately exaggerates, to the highest point, the peculiarities of a human being.

—Max Beerbohm<sup>1</sup>

**T**he word caricature derives from the Italian *caricare*, a term that first came into use in the late sixteenth century by the brothers Agostino (1557–1602) and Annibale (1560–1609) Carracci to describe drawings conveying distorted heads and exaggerated human figures.<sup>2</sup> Italian artists adopted this form of artistic creation as a means of escape and diversion from large-scale painting projects and academic practice. Caricature surfaced in England in the 1730s by way of printmaker and publisher Arthur Pond (1701–1758), who issued prints based on drawings by the Carracci brothers, Carlo Maratti (1625–1713) and Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674–1755).<sup>3</sup> Almost immediately, caricature became a booming industry in England as certain artists turned their attention to this form of artmaking full-time. Moreover, by the second half of the eighteenth century, manuals for caricaturists were readily available. As the market for satirical images expanded, the number of printmakers hired by publishing enterprises increased, underlining their significance to such business operations. Print shop windows became popular destinations, serving as free caricature galleries for public viewing. Under the leadership of such practitioners as William Hogarth (1697–1764), Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827) and James Gillray (1757–1815), caricature progressed from single-figure images to elaborate scenes filled with layered meanings.

By the nineteenth century, the zeal for caricature was at its strongest in France as an increasing number of artists began experimenting with the stylistic elements of this art form—a phenomenon spurred on by the advent of lithography. Lithography's ease of production, both artistically and economically, enabled artists to design and publish caricatures on a daily basis. Caricature became part of the social fabric of everyday life, as people eagerly awaited the latest print by caricaturists of the ilk of Paul Gavarni (1804–1866), Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) and André Gill (1840–1885). With its ability to convey a lot of information quickly and to accentuate the characteristics of figures and objects to great ends, caricature reached a broad audience in Paris, especially as a portion of its population remained illiterate.<sup>4</sup> As the dissemination of satirical images continued to proliferate into the twentieth century, in France as elsewhere, caricature increasingly fascinated a growing number of distinguished artists. Individuals such as Emily Carr (1871–1945) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) invested considerable time expressing themselves through this art form. Whether for works of a public or private nature, caricature offered artists a significant amount of imaginative freedom. In addition, caricature's flexibility as an adaptable mode of visual expression provided artists the opportunity to reuse conventions introduced by previous generations of caricaturists in order to interpret current culture and events.

The Agnes Etherington Art Centre houses an assortment of caricatures from various historical periods in its collections, of which a selection is highlighted in the exhibition *Humour Me*. While recognizing that caricature could be harmful in the reinforcement of stereotypes, this show traces the development of caricature as a tool in dismantling power structures. Through caricature, artists satirized politicians, wealthy urbanites, religious authorities and fashion trends, as well as themselves and their colleagues. This essay addresses the meaning of a number of these artworks and offers a glimpse into the careers of their creators.

## The World Is a Charade

### FIGURE 1

William Hogarth, *The Sleeping Congregation*, 1762, engraving. Gift from the estate of Mabel E. Segsworth, through the Queen's University Art Foundation, 1944 (00-1013)



Invented in Italy, caricature took on its modern form in England. In the first half of the eighteenth century, William Hogarth, in particular, delighted in the spectacle human characters could offer to a burgeoning visual satirist. Hogarth's prints are full of witty allusions and he popularized "progresses" (a series of chronological scenes) as a way to comment on human nature. As a moralist and protagonist of reform, Hogarth aimed to expose social hypocrisy through his works.

In *The Sleeping Congregation* (fig. 1), the artist criticizes the preaching habits of his day. The scene takes place in a church interior in which a minister is completely self-absorbed in reading a dull sermon and fails to notice that most congregation members are fast asleep. Sitting atop a pulpit, the clergyman can barely keep his own eyes open, and his use of a monocle to decipher passages from his handbook further underlines his obliviousness to his surroundings.<sup>5</sup> Near centre, an older parish clerk leers at the exposed bosom of the sleeping woman to his left—an act of misplaced devotion. Hogarth published two printed versions of *The Sleeping Congregation*—first in 1736 and then with slight modifications in 1762—and he also created a painting carrying the same title on a separate occasion, implying that his view toward religious teaching remained steadfast throughout his career.

In contrast to Hogarth, the vast majority of Thomas Rowlandson's works are void of moral purpose. Rowlandson directed his energy toward commenting on the foibles of humankind and displayed a considerable appetite for the

**FIGURE 2**

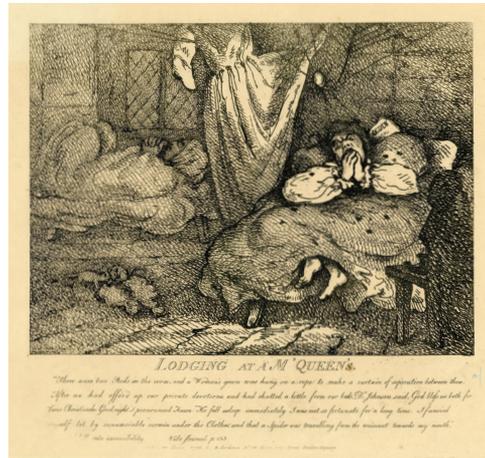
Thomas Rowlandson, *Scottifying the Palate*, 1786, etching. Gift from the estate of Mabel E. Segsworth, through the Queen's University Art Foundation, 1944 (00-945)

**FIGURE 3**

Thomas Rowlandson, *Lodging at a M'Queen's*, 1786, etching. Gift from the estate of Mabel E. Segsworth, through the Queen's University Art Foundation, 1944 (00-948)

grotesque. His inventiveness was exhaustless and he quickly became one of the most widely admired artists of the Georgian period; a market for Rowlandson's caricatures materialized in Britain and abroad.

*Scottifying the Palate* (fig. 2) and *Lodging at a M'Queen's* (fig. 3) both form part of Rowlandson's *Picturesque Beauties of Boswell*—a set of twenty etchings originally published in 1786. The prints are based after designs by Samuel Collings (active 1784–1789) and caricature some of James Boswell (1740–1795) and Samuel Johnson's (1709–1784) incidents in Scotland—a popular destination for tourists travelling in search of the picturesque.<sup>6</sup> In images where both characters are present, Johnson is identified as the older figure sporting a large, thick wig. Although Boswell sought to cultivate a bond with Johnson, jocular conflicts emerge between the two men as their differing nationalities come to the fore. In *Scottifying the Palate*, Boswell, a native of Scotland, tilts Johnson's head backward to force-feed his English-born companion a spelding—a dry, salted fish and Scottish specialty. Johnson overtly resists his partner and attempts to boot him away. Meanwhile, a group of female onlookers amusingly points at Johnson as he struggles to eat the piece of fish.



Noticeably, the scenery provides no sense of beauty in this series. The undeveloped and roughly sketched backgrounds create a humorous juxtaposition between the word “picturesque” that forms part of the series title and the actual representation of the characters and their surroundings. Rowlandson places greater emphasis on extracting comedy from everyday scenarios. In *Lodging at a M'Queen's*, the protagonists are housing overnight in a cramped space, and while Johnson is sound asleep, Boswell is frightened by the sight of a long-legged spider about to crawl onto him. The nearby rodents further add to Boswell's dismay. The coarsely etched lines in these caricatures contribute to their comedic effect.

## La comédie humaine

Whereas eighteenth-century English caricatures primarily circulated as stand-alone prints or self-contained series, French caricatures of the nineteenth century were published predominantly in journals alongside written articles. The emergence of a wide variety of illustrated satirical journals enabled artists, such as Paul Gavarni, to contribute to the tantalizing Parisian art scene at midcentury. Notably, Gavarni wrote all of his own captions, and a significant portion of his lithographic oeuvre appeared in the daily *Le Charivari* (1832–1893) between 1838 and 1848.





**FIGURE 4**  
Paul Gavarni, *Le réveil du lion*, 1846, lithograph. Gift of Daphne and Ned Franks, 2009 (52-004.03)

**FIGURE 5**  
Honoré Daumier, *Il admire les beautés de la nature. – Plaine St. Denis*, 1846, lithograph. Gift of the Carnegie Corporation (00-785)



As a comedian of manners, many of Gavarni's scenes take place in domestic settings and present characters in everyday situations, as is the case with *Le réveil du lion* (fig. 4), a print that forms part of the *Baliverneries Parisiennes*—a series addressing the nonsensical behaviour of Parisians. In this lithograph, a man rises noisily from his bed, emitting an enormous yawn. The artist capitalizes on the notion that humans and animals share certain outwardly features, likening his figure to a lion by accentuating his disheveled hair and thick beard. Drawing parallels between humans and animals had its roots in pseudoscientific theories dating back to Giovan Battista Della Porta's (1535–1615) 1586 publication *De Humana Physiognomonia* and gained further impetus in France when Johann Kaspar Lavater's (1741–1801) *L'art de connaître les hommes par la physionomie* was first published in Paris in the early 1800s.<sup>7</sup> Like others before and after him, Gavarni recognized the entertainment value that such depictions offer to the caricaturist's graphic repertoire.<sup>8</sup>

A caricaturist who victimized entire layers of Parisian society through his images, Honoré Daumier's name is synonymous with nineteenth-century French caricature and its leading satirical newspaper *Le Charivari*.<sup>9</sup> For nearly half a century, Daumier's lithographs graced the pages of illustrated journals, providing a spectacular pictorial variety of the depths of human comedy. Daumier's observational acuity, combined with his skill set as a draughtsman, led the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) to endorse caricature as France's urban art par excellence.<sup>10</sup>

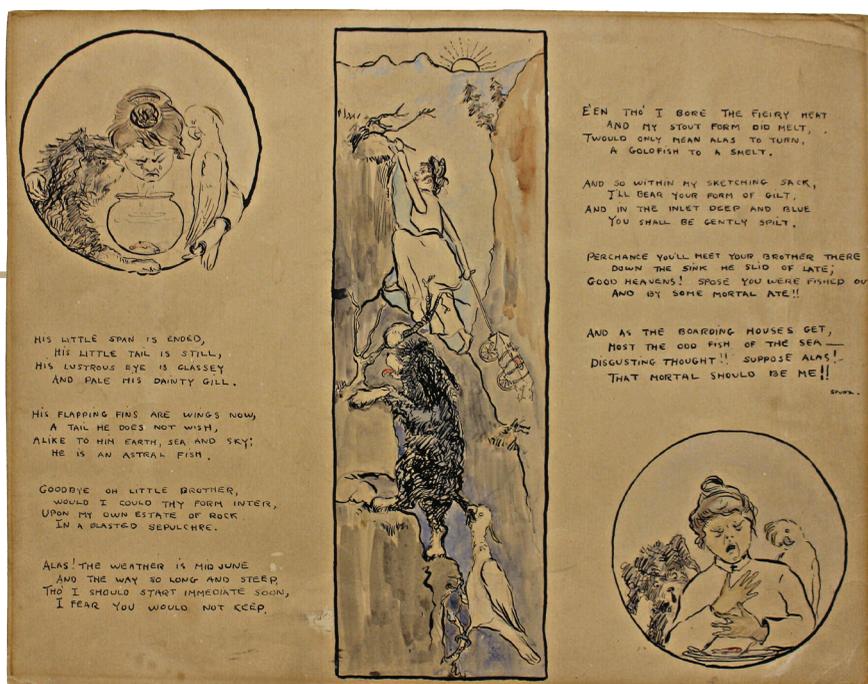
The bourgeoisie serves as the principal target in Daumier's oeuvre. Bourgeois couples feature prominently in the caricaturist's lithographs, and in many of these works the pretentiousness of the figures is ridiculed, as in *Il admire les beautés de la nature. – Plaine St. Denis* (fig. 5). Sojourns to the country became increasingly popular in the nineteenth century with the development of railway lines. Promenades enabled the nouveau riche to marvel at nature's spectacle while simultaneously flaunting their wealth and status. Instead of enjoying the pure air and admiring the beauty of their environment, the figures in Daumier's print are overwhelmed by the heat of the sun and mired in prejudice. Disenchanted with the surrounding bucolic milieu, these

repulsive individuals still protrude their stomachs in an attempt to display their dignity—a mark of their vanity. With a grimace on his face and the slant of his top hat accentuating the shape of his nose, the male character, in particular, comes across as a pompous fool.

Illustrating various forms of physical activity provided Daumier with a plethora of options to convey amusing characters. By designing a range of series in which bathers serve as protagonists—*Les Baigneurs*, *Les Baigneuses* and *Croquis d'été* to name a few—the artist could focus his attention on diverse body types and produce engaging scenes. He captures the farcical nature of an impromptu moment at a bathing establishment in *Les plaisirs de l'école de natation* (fig. 6), as a man is about to land directly on top of a hapless swimmer while executing a cannonball dive. Although the central figure has large bulging eyes, he remains unaware of the mishap he is about to cause. The scenario's relatability underscores the universal appeal of Daumier's lithographs.

## Playful Musings

Over the years, a number of Canadian artists have dabbled in caricaturing. In her thirties, Emily Carr considered becoming an illustrator, designing several political cartoons for local newspapers in British Columbia. Though she ultimately decided to pursue ambitions as a painter, Carr developed a talent for producing autobiographical caricatures. Many of her images in this genre survive in the form of whimsical, three-panelled watercolours. Conceived for personal amusement and private consumption, they are self-deprecating in nature. Carr's caricature motifs are unique; she signed most of them using the *nom de plume* SPUDZ.



**FIGURE 7**  
Emily Carr, *His Little Span Is Ended*, around 1906–1913, ink and watercolour on paper. Gift in memory of Ada Schwengers McGeer, 2020 (63-007.01)

Carr expressed genuine affection for her pets and included them as recurring characters in her autobiographical drawings. In *His Little Span Is Ended* (fig. 7), an elegiac poem that combines illustration with quatrains, Carr, her sheepdog Billie, and Sally, her white, lemon-crested Australian cockatoo, mourn the death of a goldfish. Mulling over potential burial methods for the goldfish, which would see the protagonists heroically climb atop a mountain

while safeguarding the tiny creature in a miniature carriage, Carr suddenly is overcome by the possibility that the fish could resurface on a human's dinner plate—or even worse, her own. Distraught by the mere thought of it, she clasps both hands against her chest. A silly anecdote, viewers cannot help but chuckle at the sequence of events. In this work, as with other caricatures, text and image serve to complement each other to humorous ends.



**FIGURE 8**  
John Young Johnstone, *Start Another*, 1915, graphite and gouache on paper. Gift of Mary Jane Braide in Memory of her Mother Janet G. Braide, 2010 (53-032)

Producing caricatures of colleagues and fellow artistic creators has been a common pastime among artists. Even John Young Johnstone (1887–1930), an artist reputed for his landscape paintings and not his caricaturing skills, could not shy away from poking fun at his teacher when presented with the opportunity. Before completing his artistic education in France, Johnstone spent time studying with William Brymner (1855–1925) at the Art Association of Montreal. Brymner was a beloved and exemplary teacher who had dozens and dozens of pupils. The thorough study of form was of the utmost importance to Brymner, and he enforced long, disciplined practice. A stern figure, he developed a habit for employing certain phrases as part of his teaching methods.<sup>11</sup>

Johnstone's *Start Another* (fig. 8) directly reflects one of Brymner's catchphrases. The teacher often told his frenzied pupils to “start another” as they had become embroiled in the construction of a human figure—a moment Johnstone conveys explicitly in his drawing.<sup>12</sup> Calling attention to caricature's tendency to exaggerate scale and temperament, Johnstone depicts Brymner as a colossal, doom-like figure pointing at an easel over a crushed student's head. Decked out in black, Brymner's overbearing demeanour comes to the fore. The artist wastes little time defining space, choosing instead to focus on the figures and their actions. In short, Johnstone's image captures the essence of caricature: through the simplest of means it conveys the peculiarities of a human being.

– Dr. Maxime Valsamas, Curator

**1** Max Beerbohm, quoted in *Masters of Caricature: from Hogarth and Gillray to Scarfe and Levine*, William Feaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 125.

**2** Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Art of Caricature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 7–9.

**3** Constance C. McPhee and Nadine M. Orenstein, *Infinite Jest: Caricature and Satire from Leonardo to Levine* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 5.

**4** Approximately half the population of Paris was still illiterate at mid-century, around the time when the Gavarni and Daumier caricatures featured in *Humour Me* were originally published. Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 14.

**5** The presence of a monocle or spectacles in an artwork is often symbolic of moral blindness in Western art.

**6** Samuel Johnson was a reputable English writer. He toured the western islands of Scotland with his contemporary James Boswell in the 1770s. Boswell's account of their journey, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785), served as a prelude to his later biography, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791).

**7** Lucie-Smith, *The Art of Caricature*, 16–17.

**8** Gavarni's lithograph is a lighthearted example; however, comparisons between human and animalistic features have been employed in other contexts to dehumanize targets and propagate racist ideologies.

**9** *Le Charivari* was the precursor and model for the London satirical review *Punch*, which at first was called *Punch, or The London Charivari*.

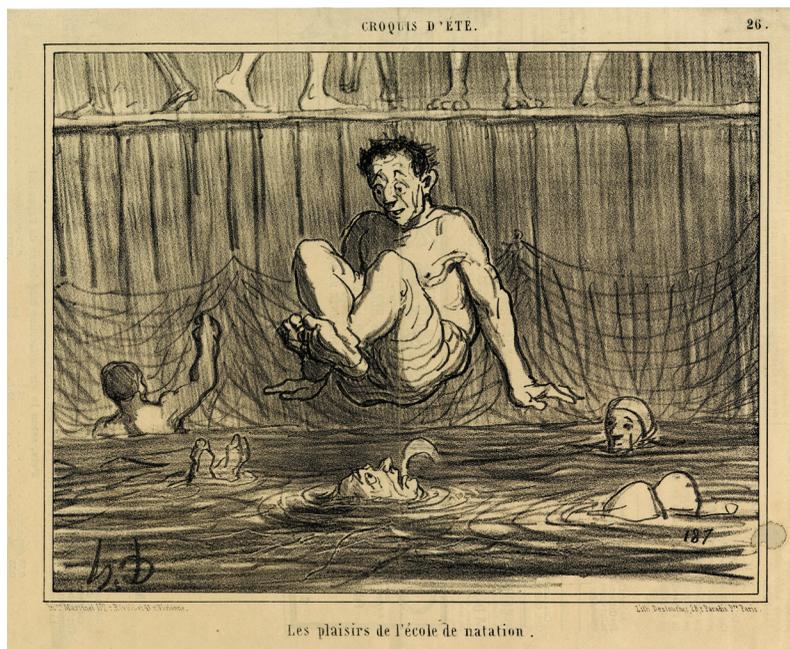
**10** Charles Baudelaire, “Quelques caricaturistes français,” in *Écrits sur l'art*, ed. Francis Moulinat (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2013), 312–322.

**11** Alicia Boutillier, “Brymner as Student and Teacher: A Solid Foundation,” in *William Brymner: Artist, Teacher, Colleague*, ed. Alicia Boutillier and Paul Maréchal (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2010), 48–55.

**12** *Ibid.*, 54.

**FIGURE 6  
and COVER**

Honoré Daumier,  
*Les plaisirs de l'école  
de natation*, 1858,  
lithograph. Gift of  
Meredith Fleming,  
1984 (27-047.7)



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